

## CH 1 Opening Conversations DRAFT VERSION

Sara N. Davis & Mary Gergen

"Language inevitably structures one's own experience of reality as well as the experience of those to whom one communicates." Rachel Hare-Mustin & Jeanne Marecek

These are exciting times for those who study gender relations. Feminist scholars, including many psychologists, now question what has heretofore been accepted as scientific truth about women and men. They have examined claims to knowledge with new questions and new philosophies about what it means to gain knowledge (Butler, 1990; Harding, 1986; Oliver, 1991). They are investigating issues of self-interest and power. They ask how established views have justified or made invisible the power of some and the oppression of many and how knowledge has benefitted some people and harmed others (Flax, 1990; Grosz, 1994; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Hekman, 1990). Central to the concerns of these gender scholars has been a focus on language. How have the terms used to describe differences between women and men been influenced by sexist biases? (Gergen, 1994) Their work has provoked strong reactions, both within and beyond the academic community, as it has opened the way for new understandings of the world, and of ourselves as gendered beings.

Within this book, we have gathered together a collection of work that lies at the cutting edge of feminist scholarship, work that challenges psychological traditions, but at the same time attempts to generate alternatives. Yet even as we commend this collection, we recognize that its meanings are not sealed within the borders of these pages. What these words mean - what importance they have - depends upon the reader, as their co-construer. As such, the book is both an invitation and a challenge to the reader. It is an invitation to enter into this exciting world, and to enjoy the prospects that these authors bring to gender studies. It is also a challenge to join in this endeavor yourself, and with the support of these chapters, generate new perspectives on gendered relations and new practices within science and society. As Brenda Marshall has said, "What is at stake in our readings, our interpretations? It's not just a game. Every interpretation is a political move." So too are your responses to these pages.

Feminist Psychology: A Glance Backward

The basic commitment of feminist psychologists from many

backgrounds has been to overcome the commonplace stereotypes of gender differences, and to eradicate the biases that serve to suppress women in society. They have taken several different scientific paths to achieve this goal. Following the work of philosopher Sandra Harding (1986), we can describe three such paths in the field of gender studies in psychology today, and gain a better appreciation of the particular character of this book.

The traditional path, still predominant in much of psychology, is the empiricist one. Here the scientist sets out to study events in the world, to collect data in a reliable and valid manner, and to report these findings objectively. The empirical study of sex differences dates to the early part of the century, and already the feminist voice could be heard, often in objection to the practices of other researchers.

Two early feminist psychologists, who attacked the traditional wisdoms of the field, were Helen Thompson Woolley and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Woolley criticized the sex difference research then practiced for being the codification of male biases against women. For example, psychologists, as well as other scholars, believed that too much intense brain activity, as required by higher education, would enfeeble the reproductive capacities of a woman, and thus women were unsuitable candidates for professional degrees. Leta Stetter Hollingworth also challenged the prevailing wisdom; she argued that sex difference research was founded on very few significant results, despite efforts by psychologists to emphasize differences, and this research tended to segregate the sexes into the categories of "well-adjusted males" and "maladjusted females" (Morawski, 1994).

Despite these critiques of early research efforts to define sex differences, the effort to find scientific evidence that differentiated the sexes continued unabated over the century. The earliest major summary of this work covering the first sixty years of the century in the U.S. was *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). In their conclusions, these editors, in agreement with Woolley and Hollingworth, found very few well-documented differences between the sexes. Thereafter, more sophisticated quantitative methods, such as meta-analysis, were developed; yet, despite the capacity to increase the scope and precision of the measurements, researchers discovered very few significant differences in psychological variables between the sexes (Eagly, 1987; Hyde & Linn, 1986).

Although empirical studies are still the most prevalent form of inquiry within gender studies in psychology, limitations to this way of doing research have been noted. Most importantly, some have argued that empirical research disrupts the contextualized nature of subjects' lives. Ideally, from the empirical point of view, subjects are taken out of their normal environments and placed in a situation designed by the researcher. In order to maintain scientific rigor, the scientist controls as many aspects of the research situation as possible, and then manipulates significant variables in order to discover the causal relations among

variables. Studying "real" people in their ordinary settings is not ideal for developing scientifically sophisticated results, from the empiricist viewpoint. Critics argue that this method of doing research interferes with the utility of the results (Curt, 1994; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gergen, 1988); they are not about real people in their life circumstances, but are artifacts of scientific manipulations. Empirical research practices also discourage any relationship between the scientist and subject, thus people are objectified (as "things") for research purposes. Empirical researchers also believe that research methods should be value-neutral in order to avoid the danger of any politicized interest influencing the subjects within the experimental setting. Rather than trying to solve immediate practical problems, empirical scientists argue that they are testing scientific hypotheses drawn from theory, not exploring everyday life (Gergen, 1988). While there are many advantages to the empirical method, these limitations have encouraged some feminist psychologists to attempt other approaches to increasing knowledge within the field.

An important alternative to the empirical approach is identified as the Feminist Standpoint Position (Harding, 1986). This position emphasizes the importance of knowledge-gathering as a personal activity, in which the researcher and the researched are recognized as in relation to one another. Both must take into account their own experiences, gained from their own perspectives, not from some universal standpoint, the so-called "God's eye view", which the objectivity-seeking empirical psychologists value (Haraway, 1988). Within the United States, the most well-known exponents of the feminist standpoint position in psychology are Harvard psychologist, Carol Gilligan, and her colleagues. Gilligan's classic book, *In a Different Voice*, emphasized the capacity of women to speak from their own experiences (1982). Many standpoint psychologists have studied individual experiences as a way to enrich the psychology of women, while also indirectly challenging the validity of traditional scientific methods. In rejecting the negativity of the traditional stereotypes of women, Feminist Standpoint researchers have often celebrated women's special natures, and thus, have emphasized rather than denied important differences between the sexes (Daly, 1978; Hartsock, 1983).

Empiricist psychologists have both benefitted from and complained about the views of standpoint psychologists. Many scientific psychologists have faulted the feminist standpoint researchers for the lack of scientific rigor and objectivity in their work. The standpoint theorists have also been criticized for their essentialist views of women, that is views that suggest that women are either born different from men, or inevitably must become so. Others question the feminist standpoint notion that personal narratives can serve as the final arbiter of "truth".

While many feminists have accepted women's differences from men, especially as they are celebrated in many standpoint theories, there is also a wariness of some feminist psychologists that widening the gaps

between men and women in terms of basic human qualities may instantiate stereotyped thinking and the rigidifying of social segregation. If, for example, women are found to be more nurturant than men, can they make difficult and important decisions? Should they be allowed to become police officers, attend military academies or run for President, who is Chief of Staff for all the Armed Services, if they are so nurturant?

With numerous doubts about past practices, many feminists have sought ways of working that would capitalize on the strengths of each of these positions, but would at the same time, alter our understanding of how they can contribute to the field. In adding richness and dimension to feminist inquiry, this new position also links psychology to other feminist studies, thus giving it a voice in broader fields of inquiry. Compelled by the view of science and knowledge as human inventions, these scholars join many others in the sciences and humanities in a social constructionist orientation.

#### Social Construction in the Foreground

"The danger of thinking you know it all is at no time greater than when it comes to grasping hold of definitions." Diane Elam

As Diane Elam has suggested in this quotation, it is always dangerous to define something. And, although there are many differences and disagreements among feminist scholars who call themselves social constructionists, one theme provides a broad accord. This is the awareness of science as a communal achievement. To help you evaluate the contributions appearing in this volume, a description of the core features of social constructionism are set forth.

1. Central to the social constructionist position is the view that whatever we label as a "fact" is dependent upon the language communities that have created and sustained it. Social constructionists argue that all forms of naming are socially constructed, including seemingly basic biological categories, such as the female - male sex distinction (Butler, 1990; 1993). The social constructionist stance is at odds with our everyday notions that sex is an essential biologically-based distinction. Talking about "the sexes" is an important way of making sense within our world, and that it is not easy to imagine that this distinction is arbitrary or that we could eliminate it from our vocabularies (Fuss, 1989; Hekman, 1990). While, on the surface it may seem absurd to argue against "the reality" of basic biological sex differences, recall that "women" have been ejected from the Olympics in recent years for lacking the proper chromosomal indicators that the athlete in question is a woman. This determination of sex, as provided by chromosome measurements, can

result in a person being declared "male", despite all other indicators that the person "is" a woman. In terms of a psychology of gender, the findings concerning gender differences and the nature of women and men are intimately connected to the scientific communities that advance them. The social constructionist position does not imply that such facts are, therefore, useless or invalid; on the contrary they are used by people to make sense of their lives (Kitzinger, 1987; Marecek, 1995).

2. People generate their truth from the languages available to them. Thus, any "fact" about the world depends upon the language within which it is expressed. Things are known through their names. Words do not simply "map" or "copy" the world; they create what we take the world to be. The impact of this view on a psychology of gender is that terms of understanding within the field are open to question and reconstruction. Some feminist social constructionists, for example, have challenged the ways in which the sexes have often been described as "opposites" (Butler, 1990; Hekman, 1990). Constructionists ask whether psychologists, for example, should accept the notion that the basic polarities of the discipline - man vs. woman; male vs. female; and masculine vs. feminine - are the most important distinctions to study? They ask: do we always, everywhere, or anywhere, want to accept these dichotomies? What are the social costs in doing so? At the same time as questions such as these should be asked, the social constructionist does not require questioning every choice in every situation. Sometimes one may emphasize sex differences, and sometimes one may minimize them (Gergen, 1993). For example, in cases of job equity, arguing gender differences may (or may not) be essential to the effort of ensuring the rights of women (Farganis, 1994).

Within the psychology of gender, and in other disciplines, women of color have objected to the manner in which non-colored women have claimed to speak for all women, without taking the differences among women into account. Social constructionist ideas have been liberating to those who struggle with the difficulties of being defined by others, without suggesting that there is only one proper way to be defined. As bell hooks has said, social constructionist "thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness". We are reminded that there are multiple ways of giving words to create worlds, and no one way is the only way.

3. The social constructionist position implies that any type of description of the nature of reality is dependent upon the historical and

cultural location of that description. Every culture has its own notions of the "real". How ancient Greek or Roman philosophers described the members of a household was influenced by whether or not they had the status of free men or women and slaves, for example; their written passages are filled with distinctions between free men and women and slaves that do not "make sense" to us. In addition, within any subculture, even within the same historical and general cultural period, groups of people have different distinctions that are useful for them, but might not be sensible to outsiders. People who are heavily involved in body piercing and tattooing, for example, adhere to standards of fashion, physical beauty and body boundaries that differ from people who are not involved in these practices. Because there are many such linguistic groups, even within one locale, the opportunities for different images of the good, the true, and the beautiful are great. The social constructionist position helps to overcome the conflicts that may occur when different versions of reality come into contention. From this position, it is possible to acknowledge the multiplicity of worldviews, and to work toward creating conditions wherein the separate parties can find opportunities for mutuality, tolerance and compromise.

4. Social constructionists generally hold that there are no universal ethical principles, but that they are also constituted within so-called "language games" and sustained by discrete social communities (Elam, . Thus there is no single way to set ethical standards, but there may be many. In this sense, a social constructionist position is congenial with the standpoint position represented by Gilligan, in that there is no hierarchy of universal moral principles that gives preference to justice considerations over caring. From the social constructionist approach, there are no answers to moral dilemmas that are independent of communities. Despite the inadmissibility of foundational principles, the social constructionist position has strong implications for moral inquiry and action (Gergen, 1994). A concern with the nature of values is intrinsic to a feminist social constructionist position, and when one evaluates a scientific explanation one can ask what are the ethical considerations that are embedded in the framing of the explanation, its origins, its classification system, and its consequences. One cannot ignore value considerations and to claim that one is "merely reporting the facts." Because facts are socially constructed, they are always subject to questioning for their ethical implications. This is consistent with the political goals of feminism.

5. Social constructionists emphasize that any claims to reality can be viewed with skepticism. Unlike some scientific viewpoints that claim that we can know the facts about the world by merely looking at (or

smelling, tasting, touching, or listening to) it, the social constructionist position emphasizes that our sensory experiences are mediated by our linguistic descriptions of our experiences (Burr, 1995). That is, we know our sensory worlds via language, just as we know the abstract world. The social constructionist position does not allow exceptions to this skeptical stance, even when one's private sensory experiences are at stake. We cannot know ourselves, free of cultural constraints, any more than we can know other parts of the world. We must always recognize ourselves as embedded in cultural communities. ...One can ask questions about the world, but cannot claim to have discovered the truth. The best one can expect is that a new interpretation, a different perspective, or an interesting slant can be created. In this sense social constructionism invites creativity, new interpretations, and an openness to other fields of knowledge. Whether a new interpretation becomes acceptable depends importantly upon others in the linguistic community.

#### Contextualizing Social Constructionism: The Case of "Family Values"

Once words gain usage in the culture, it is often difficult to imagine that they create rather than reflect a given reality in the world. If we investigate the nature of a relatively new phrase, we can more easily see the constructed nature of a reality. Let us consider the phrase, "Family values", a widely used political slogan that in the 90's has become a code word for a certain kind of family unit. By evaluating this phrase, one can gain a sense of how language works to shape our notions of reality.

"Family Values" is most often used today to suggest a general good. While once it may have been a phrase that would bring up a question as to what kinds of values a family might have, or a question of how much families were valued as a social unit, a shift has taken place such that "family values" has become defined more narrowly. Although never specifically defined, this slogan functions to suggest that good family values are found in a single kind of family: middle-class, with few children, a mother at home, engaged in childrearing and other "non-work" activity, and a strong father, who is the major wage-earner. The family is invested with Northern European cultural, social and religious values. The use of this term in a persistent and strategic manner by conservative politicians, especially, has had the effect of denigrating any one who does not fit this mold. Note that while apparently saying something good, which is designed to encompass all people, the phrase has evolved so as to belittle and exclude those who do not fit the mold.

The deployment of this concept within our culture raises some serious concerns from a social constructionist position. If our description above is an adequate framing of the phrase, (and some of those who use this term might argue about that), many important questions may be

asked. How can a single model of family adequately serve a diverse, heterogeneous society? Who gains power by supporting this model for family life? Will those who do not fit this definition be considered sufficiently unworthy that valuable resources will be withheld from them? What opportunities does adherence to this model open or deny to women? What other ways of viewing the world become invisible?

Some answers are immediately apparent. Adherence to a single model denies the richness and diversity of the culture. If people have only one version of family life to follow, they become limited in the vision of their lives. Women's ambitions to careers and men's desires to be primarily family-oriented are thwarted. One's failure to meet the standards of the correct family values may result in punishment, as for example, being eliminated from welfare rolls, losing medical care benefits, and so forth. Politicians who favor this rhetoric can appear to be supporting positive social values and decrying the impact of "bad families" on society. The result of insinuating the universality of family values into the society produces a narrow and rigid version of families, in which diversity cannot be accommodated. The concept of family values functions in a way that attempts to unite people behind a single shared vision, in which traditional sex roles are legitimated and extended, at the cost of alternatives. For many people, both those squeezed within this one form of life, and those squeezed out of it, the results are negative. Yet, because of the repetitious rehearsal of this phrase within the public arena, this restricted notion of what is the good life slips into the vocabulary and becomes a part of our social reality.

In the arena of gender studies, terms such as "family values" become insinuated into forms of speech, and shape how men and women live together. Several chapters in the book illustrate how various forms of language have restricted people's lives.

### Constructionist Emphases in the Present Volume

As editors of this book, our intentions are to bring to diverse audiences readings in which the authors have expanded the boundaries and potentials of psychology. We invite our readers to come together in this circles where different intellectual trends converge. Scholars from sociology, philosophy, education, anthropology, sexology, family therapy, and elsewhere have added a voice in this colloquy on gender issues. While they have come from many backgrounds, and many theoretical and feminist positions, they all have enriched a social constructionist form of work. While each of the chapters, to be briefly described below, is unique, the authors have related to their materials in ways that unite them. We think five qualities in particular give them a coherence with one another.

### 1. Reflexivity in their approach to their subject matters

Far from attempting to hide their own involvement in their projects, these authors frequently reflect on their own position with respect to the context of their work. They ask themselves: Who am I with respect to the respondents, how do I understand the social customs described here? What are the consequences to others if I present information in a particular fashion? This reflexivity enables them to participate with subjects in relationships with a high degree of openness, and to use these experiences to help organize their understandings, with a sense of commitment to their values about gender relations.

The authors' reflexive forms of writing also provide an entry into the text for the reader, allowing them to develop a questioning attitude toward the contents and conclusions the authors are advancing. Usually authors try to seal their texts against this type of intrusion. In this sense readers are encouraged to raise questions about the author's views, to develop their own syntheses of the materials, as well as to develop greater reflexivity about their own positions.

### 2. Knowledge claims are seen as continually developing, never reaching a permanent endstate or conclusion.

As evidence of this stance, several of our authors rethink the assumptions that guided earlier work and about how they would now structure the text differently. They understand that a particular piece of research or theory grows out of a common intellectual understanding in a particular historical period. When a particular ethos changes, new ways of constructing materials develop, which may surpass the old in some fashion. In general, mainstream psychologists do not expect to scrutinize the linguistic conventions that govern their research and writing, the historical period in which they have collected data, nor the political implications of their work. This type of reflection, if it happens at all, occurs outside of the research arena and separated from the research itself (Eagly, 1995). The emerging view, in contrast, is that work should be constantly under review, from diverse political and social positions. One recognizes that every choice within the development of a research condition or form of reporting is open to critical evaluation and possible alteration.

### 3. The authors continually affirm that they and all with whom they are working are identified with particular groups that influence their own formations.

Most particularly, the authors attend to the ways in which gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientations, ableness, and other personal qualities combine to influence their own discourses. In many instances, an author claims a personal vantage point, and then grapples with its utility and its limitations for understanding others. At times authors may want to

transcend their vantage points, but be unable to do so. Locating one's own social class boundaries, for example, may help to explain one's understanding of a particular issue and one's ways of relating to others.

4. The search for new forms of cultural life is a central focus. In everyday life we seldom question common sense language and its many uses. Each morning when the alarm clock goes off, we cannot spend several minutes considering Einstein's theory of relativity as it relates to time. Because the notion of clock-time is so deeply embedded in our daily life, it is difficult to recognize its constructed nature. It has been the role of feminists to heighten our awareness of many of these common sense ideas, and especially to show the ways in which they can function in a subtle manner to oppress women, as well as men. In this vein, many common words and expressions, - the term mankind, for example - are unpacked to expose them for the multiple agendas they carry and the ways that they benefit some people over others. Equally important is the opportunity ...to create new linguistic forms that can reorganize, refresh and alter existing ways of living (Lather, 1995). Within these readings illustrations of these efforts to create new ways of talking abound.

5. Research endeavors should be contextualized so as to enhance their usefulness to people. Feminist psychologists often find potential value in diverse scholarly pursuits. Encouraging multiple methods, these psychologists are free to combine various formats in order to best serve the interests of those with whom they work. Often practical social aims -- family therapy, educational policy, and community service -- are combined with scientific questions, and these goals encourage the use of various methods of inquiry. Besides experimental formats, they work with case studies, participant observation studies, archival studies, discourse analysis, and the study of narrative and other literary devices. Many chapters in the book illustrate how one can study such diverse activities and artifacts as textbooks, forms of dress, museums, playgrounds, therapy sessions, parenting, athletics, and ordinary conversations with various methods of research.

Organization of the book:

The book is divided into ten sections, which are developed to stress topics that are of special interest to contemporary gender scholars. However, most readings integrate diverse topics; in particular, they address themes related to equity, power, oppression, and identity, so

they can be related to readings from other sections as well as those within their own section. The social constructionist metatheoretical umbrella also unifies the diversity of readings, and facilitates a growing familiarity with this approach to psychology among readers .

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